

Surf's up

Beachgoers flock to sun and sand

By Lesley Mahoney
STAFF WRITER

With only two inches of rain since the end of May and enough sun to last us until Labor Day, people are flocking in droves across Powder Point Bridge to soak up the summer rays at Duxbury Beach.

"All in all, this has been a bumper summer," said Harbormaster Donald Beers. "People are having a ball.

"It's probably been the busiest summer I've ever had," said Beers, who has served as the town's harbormaster for 19 years.

Following last summer's disastrous weather, this season's perpetual sun is a welcome reprieve — allowing much better access to the beach.

"This time last year we were dealing with a hurricane," Beers said.

While Hurricane Danny is moving up the coast, Beers said he doesn't expect more than some southeast wind and a lot of rain.

Beers also credits a sound economy for this season's success.¹

Assistant Harbormaster Peter Smey, the department's executive officer, was checking permits at the east end of Powder Point Bridge this week — at the station deemed "54." He said it's not unusual for upwards of 8,000 people to visit the beach in a day.

This is Smey's third year with the department.

"I love my job. It's great job and I enjoy helping people," he said. "We do a lot of educating people. We are educators."

Smey, 39, an EMT and reserve intermittent police officer, is one of 29 people in the state who recently completed a 14-month 351-hour harbormaster program. He will graduate at the end of next month.

Smey, of Pembroke, previously worked as a carpenter. He said the most dramatic event in his career with the department was three years ago when he was first on the scene for a boating accident in which the victim ultimately died.

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The Harbormaster/Coastal Natural Resources Department encompasses a three-prong effort, rotating a staff of approximately 20 people to provide harbor, beach, and marine patrols.

The interaction between the three is what makes the whole operation "such a class act," Beers said.

On their toes

Because of this summer's non-stop crowds, the down days the Harbormaster Department counts on to work on equipment and refresh the staff have been virtually non-existent.

But Beers is not complaining.

"I'd just as soon see this over a slow year," he said, all the while acknowledging increased incidents can be taxing on staff.

Beers, however, said he's not worried his staff will get strung out.

"It's a good team — an excellent team... And I mandate that no one works over 40 hours per week except me," he said. Unless, of course, there is an emergency.

And with such an influx of patrons, the Harbormaster Department and the Recreation Department's lifeguards are kept on their toes.

"The more people you get, the bigger chance you have for incidents," Beers said.

So far this summer, the Harbormaster and Fire Departments have responded to rescues including heart attacks and diving mishaps.

Beers said missing children is one of the department's biggest concerns.

He mentioned an incident this season when a child was separated from his parents at the east end of the Powder Point Bridge. Beers said he was found at the west end.

"There's nothing on the beach that scares us more than a missing child," said Beers, adding it takes an average of three to four minutes to locate a missing child using a full team effort.

Lifeguards Kerri McCarthy 20, and Brian Caswell, 19 agree.

"Big waves also put me on edge," McCarthy said.

For Assistant Harbormaster Bob Fuller, a paramedic who is in his first year with the department, said he enjoys making sure everyone has a good time, as well as a safe time.

"I think one of the biggest problems is that a lot of people don't know about safety on a boat or in the water," said Fuller, 35.

Beers said one of the biggest challenges the department has faced this summer has been tough access for four-wheel drive vehicles either because they don't work properly or because they can't clear obstacles on the front beach. Heavy use, combined with a lot of sun and lack of rain, have created dry beach conditions that contribute to the problem.

As a result, Beers said he has assigned an officer to assist vehicles in that area and has called upon a contractor to bring in a front-end loader to make the path easier to traverse.

All for one and one for all

When it comes to staffing the beach, it's a team effort. The lifeguards, who report to the recreation department, work closely with the Harbormaster Department as well as with the police and fire departments when warranted.

Recreation Director Gordon Cushing agrees this summer has been a stellar season so far.

"The summer has been going very well," said Cushing.

And during the entire month of June, there was not one rain day — an occurrence Cushing said he has not seen in the eight years he's been on board.

"The staff is doing a great job," he said.

Cushing staffs two lifeguards per day at Duxbury Beach who cover 200 yards of the beach from one lifeguard tower.

With so many days reaching

temperatures over 90 degrees Fahrenheit, Cushing said his staff is particularly on the lookout for heart-related illnesses and heatstroke.

He also pointed out his staff is not immune to heat complications.

In fact, one lifeguard suffered from heatstroke this summer.

McCarthy was that lifeguard.

"I don't think I got enough water," she said.

"Eight hours in 90-degree weather especially at the end of five days is tough," Cushing said.

He said people get the "Baywatch" image when it comes to lifeguards.

"Some of it's real, but most of it's fantasy," said Cushing, who once worked as a lifeguard on Cape Cod.

But McCarthy and Caswell

admit the job has its perks.

"You get to go to the beach, stay in the sun and get paid," Caswell said.

"And you get a great tan," McCarthy said. "By far, it's the best summer job."

As far as dramatic events go, Cushing mentioned an incident this summer when a beach patron complained about another patron. The lifeguards needed to call for assistance in mediating the problem.

The lifeguards all point to an incident that occurred during the lightning storm about a month ago.

They were all huddled in the shack up by the parking lot when a bolt of lightning hit.

"All three of us were up in the harbormaster's shack when it was struck and we all felt the shock," McCarthy

said.

"I could feel it shoot up my body," said lifeguard Jason Hurd, 17.

Fortunately, all of the guards made it through the storm unscathed.

In spite of it all, this summer has been relatively calm.

"Knock on wood," Cushing said.

To ensure the guards don't get too comfortable, he offers training and refresher courses on a regular basis.

Just last Saturday, Cushing said he showed a video to the lifeguard that included a guard from California who witnessed a drowning.

"It's a good wake-up call for guards — something good to see half-way through the season. You don't want anyone to get complacent," he said.